

The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English

Volume 13 | Issue 1

Article 5

2011

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Recommended Citation

Huber, Christina L. and Potratz, Heidi (2011) "Domestic Soldier: Kitty's Secondary Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in The Return of the Soldier," *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol13/iss1/5>

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Domestic Soldier: Kitty's Secondary Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in The Return of the Soldier

Keywords

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, The Return of the Soldier, Rebecca West

**Domestic Soldier:
Kitty's Secondary Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in *The
Return of the Soldier***

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British writer Rebecca West is ordinarily anything but sympathetic to upper-class women, whom she labels as “parasites” who “do not create sufficient use-value to justify their support by the community” (Marcus 115). Yet, when read in light of the trauma of war, West’s treatment of the aristocratic Kitty Baldry allows for a surprisingly compassionate reading. When her husband, Chris, returns from World War I with a severe case of shell-shock in West’s novel *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), Kitty’s life is thrown into disarray. With Chris suffering from amnesia and having

no recollection of his marriage, everything from Kitty's most intimate relationships to the way society views her role in the world begins to change.

Yet, while Chris is given the best medical care available and is even allowed to spend copious amounts of time luxuriating with his ex-lover, Margaret, in the hopes of finding a cure for his shell-shock, Kitty is left to endure the painful situation in silence and solitude. Though Kitty suffers greatly as an apparent bystander to Chris's ordeal and, like a besieged soldier, exhibits many classic signs of trauma, she is largely ignored by the patriarchal, war-driven society in which she lives. The same lack of interest is true of recent critics, even feminist scholars who might be most sympathetic to her cause. While Chris's psychological distress is acknowledged and deemed worthy of treatment, Kitty's trauma is overlooked, as even the novel's other female characters refuse to acknowledge her pain as legitimate. This is due, in large part, to the fact that Kitty's trauma is highly feminine in nature and, therefore, unlikely to be recognized by a male-dominated society that views women's distress not as a medical concern but as the mark of the weaker sex. Thus, Kitty suffers her own private, domestic war in solitude, and this isolated conflict leads her to experience her own socially unacknowledged version of what we today would term Secondary Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

It is not unreasonable to conclude that West, as an early feminist and longtime suffragette, would have conceptualized such a forward-thinking, feminist narrative, even early in her literary career. Joining the feminist cause in

1909, nearly a decade before the publication of *The Return of the Soldier*, West distributed fliers, attended meetings, and used her writing skills to document and critique the movement. Eventually, writing under her given name, Cecily Fairfield, West joined the staff of the *Freewoman*, a feminist newspaper which advocated free love and urged women to remain unmarried. West not only promoted these ideas in her professional life but also championed the rights of women in her personal diaries.

She was particularly passionate about women remaining unmarried because, upon marriage, women gave up their property rights and monetary earnings. Additionally, as legal and social systems favored men, women had little recourse if their husbands treated them unfairly. In a 1928 article published in the *New York Times*, West simply writes, “Men are cruel to women” (“Women’s Lot as a Woman Sees It” 4). In fact, in his early biography of West, Motley F. Deakin argues that she believed “man was woman’s most persistent [...] enemy” (19).

These ideas about marriage were drawn directly from West’s views on patriarchal society as a whole. During the early twentieth century, Deakin asserts that “[w]omen were expected to exemplify virtue. They were forced to practice an aestheticism of thought, of conduct, of clothes, of food not required by men [...] Wherever she turned West found women hemmed in, restricted, sacrificed to men’s expectations” (19-20). West despised the widely acknowledged idea of a separate domestic sphere, which barred women access to the public world and turned

feminine problems into petty household issues. In 1915, after her long-time lover H.G. Wells installed her and their son in a house in a London suburb, West, feeling confined, emphatically wrote, “I hate domesticity” (qtd. in Rollyson 62). It is counterintuitive, then, that West, who was writing *The Return of the Soldier* at this time, would ignore Kitty’s plight as a married woman with little power beyond the home.

Additionally, West’s own articles from this time period prove that she was very aware of the particular sacrifices women were forced to make during war, an engine driven by patriarchy. In her article “The Cordite Makers,” West writes, “Surely, never before in modern history can women have lived a life so completely parallel to that of the regular army. The girls who take up this work sacrifice almost as much as the men do who enlist” (14). West continues by detailing how difficult it is for these women, trained in domesticity, to work for twelve hours per day, earning a wage of only thirty shillings. They ate and slept in barracks, and even when the women did get time off, they were often too tired or too poor to travel home to see their families (13-14). Undoubtedly, West understood that women on the home front were deeply affected, and perhaps even damaged, by the war that was devastating Britain. This understanding, coupled with her firm feminist stance, may have led Rebecca West to write a novel that focuses not only on Chris’ but also on Kitty’s wartime trauma.

Though neglected for much of its history, *The Return of the Soldier* has received significantly more scholarly

attention in the last two decades. Recent critics, such as Esther McCallum-Stewart and Marina McKay, place the novel within the context of the larger phenomenon of World War I literature, comparing it to other contemporary works. Only in the last five years, however, has there been a noticeable increase in scholarship focused exclusively upon *The Return of the Soldier*. Nevertheless, these authors tend to spotlight Chris' psychology and trauma. Surprisingly, even feminist scholars like Angela K. Smith and Claire M. Tylee rarely mention Kitty as little more than a footnote in an otherwise complex narrative.

In his 2008 article, "Trauma and Cure in West's *The Return of the Soldier*," Steve Pinkerton attempts to correct this oversight by spending several paragraphs discussing Kitty's reaction to the love affair taking place in her own home. Still, the bulk of Pinkerton's argument focuses not on Kitty but rather on Margaret's healing power and camaraderie with Chris. In addition, while her essay entitled "Complicating Kitty: A Textual Variant in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*" does focus explicitly on the role Kitty plays in the novel, Melissa Edmundson paints Kitty as a calculating woman who rules her household with severe authoritarianism. Thus, Pinkerton and Edmundson bring Kitty into the critical conversation only to interpret her role as little more than that of a domineering, arrogant housewife.

A closer analysis of Kitty's role in the text reveals not only her trauma but also the war-like battle she must fight. As with any war, Kitty's private battle begins with an invasion. Just as the German invasion of the neutral country

of Belgium sparked World War I, the beginning of Kitty's own conflict is signaled when Margaret appears at Baldry Court in order to help Chris through his amnesia. Though Kitty, by means of her sex and her class, is barred (either legally or by convention) from voting, owning her own business, and holding a political office, she does have the ability to run her own home. Indeed, Baldry Court is the only domain where Kitty has any substantial influence. Thus, Margaret's appearance there is not just out of the ordinary—it is a tangible threat to Kitty's only place of power.

Almost immediately, Jenny and Kitty begin to “other” Margaret, much as World War I soldiers “othered” the enemy. To Kitty, who has spent her entire life in the upper echelons of English society, Margaret's working-class persona is both foreign and frightening. Though Jenny narrates the scene in which Margaret first appears at Baldry Court, the reader can assume by the descriptions of Kitty's disdain that she shares Jenny's disgust. Jenny first describes Margaret's clothing as strange and somehow grotesque. She notes that “[s]he [Margaret] was repulsively furred with neglect and poverty” (10). The use of the word *furred* reinforces the fact that Kitty and Jenny see Margaret as animalistic and even subhuman. Inadequacy seems to emanate from Margaret just as fur grows from an animal. Only a few lines later, the women, seeing Margaret's discomfort at having to deliver news of Chris' accident, “smile triumphantly at the spectacle of a fellow-creature [Margaret] occupied in baseness” (11). While an aristocratic woman is assumed to have honor and the admiration of

others, someone like Margaret is considered by those above her to be mangy, immoral, and ignoble.

In fact, Kitty views Margaret, her culture, and her customs as so debased that she cannot believe Margaret's story about Chris without being shown tangible evidence. When Margaret first tells her story, Kitty accuses her of being greedy and cruel. She says, "You come to tell this story because you think that you will get some money. I've read of such cases in the papers" (14). Margaret has effectively been labeled as one of dozens of scorned women who make a living preying on respectable people. Just as Chris would have been trained to view the Germans as coldblooded killers and rapists, the aristocratic culture in which she lives has taught Kitty to believe that Margaret is nothing more than a crude stereotype of a working-class woman.

Yet, Chris, who ought to have understood Kitty's aversion to Margaret, abandons Kitty and forces her to accept Margaret. On his first evening back at Baldry Court, Chris tells his wife, "If I do not see Margaret Allington I shall die." Kitty replies, "You shall see her as much as you like" (30). To be forced to entertain an enemy in your own home in order to save the life of your comrade is truly an act of courage, and something not even the British soldiers were asked to do. Instead, these men were told to loathe the Germans, to kill them, and to do it proudly. Society as a whole ordained this process and even praised World War I veterans for their bravery and skill. In short, there was, for most soldiers, a clear-cut distinction between comrades and enemies. To kill an enemy was not only a necessary feat but

also a noble one.

Kitty, on the other hand, suffers a severe blurring of the lines between friend and foe. Not only is Chris, who is supposed to be Kitty's ally and protector, begging to spend time with a known adversary, but Kitty is also left to confront this deeply confusing situation on her own. Since her plight is in the private and not public sphere, there is no one to whom she can turn for help. Indeed, as an aristocratic woman, Kitty has been trained to run her household, to care for her family, and to do it with a quiet, accepting nature. Even if Chris were to begin a sexual relationship with Margaret—arguably the ultimate act of betrayal—Kitty would be expected to shoulder this burden silently.

Of course, Margaret's invasion into Kitty's world is followed almost immediately by a searing sense of loss. After Margaret's first visit to Baldry Court, while Chris is still in the hospital, Kitty quickly learns that Chris is indeed suffering from shell-shock and will be returning home. Yet, even before his arrival, Kitty understands that she has lost her husband. After Margaret leaves, Kitty tells Jenny that the true meaning of Margaret's story is not merely Chris' injury. More importantly, according to Kitty, "[i]t shows that there are bits of him [Chris] [that they] don't know...It's all such a breach of trust" (17). However, in spite of this sudden feeling of betrayal and disenchantment, Kitty has no choice but to fight for the continuation of her marriage. While, on one hand, a marriage leaves Kitty completely vulnerable to the whims of her husband, it also allows her to maintain her status as an aristocratic woman and her power over Baldry

Court.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, marital arrangements usually had more to do with necessity than love. As Jenni Calder writes in her book *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction*, women like Kitty “have no reality except in terms of the marriages they are to make, or fail to make, or make and then ruin” (18). In other words, Kitty’s sense of selfhood as well as her place within the larger society is entirely dependent upon her marriage to Chris. Margaret’s presence in Kitty’s home represents a new obstacle to this socioeconomic arrangement. Whether or not Kitty loves Chris or even values the intimacy of their marriage is irrelevant because their relationship is not a love match. Indeed, Kitty’s entire identity is based upon her role as Chris’ wife; if Chris chooses Margaret over Kitty, then Kitty’s psychological and socioeconomic identity is almost completely jeopardized.

This is, more than likely, the first time Kitty has been so starkly presented with such a reality. After a lifetime of living in the upper echelons of society and more than a decade of secure, if not happy, union with Chris, the harsh realization that her world is a social construct has deep and long-standing implications for Kitty’s mental well-being. Though she may very well see the limitations of such a world, Kitty has no choice but to fight for the reinstatement of class boundaries between Chris and Margaret as well as the patriarchy that will leave her protected through the system of marriage.

Interestingly, Kitty’s disillusionment with her real

social status parallels the feelings of many World War I soldiers. These men entered the war with high hopes of attaining glory and respect, only to realize that the idea of war as honor was a fallacy constructed by a society that needed men to willingly enter into battle. Instead of reaching hero status, these young men were irreversibly maimed, not only physically but also psychologically, by the horrors of trench warfare. As Paul Fussell writes in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, “[t]he Great War took place in what was, compared with ours, a static world where values appeared to be stable” (21). So, for these young men who had grown up in a time of constancy where morality was fairly black and white and everyone’s role in society was clearly defined, the shock of the truth of war was truly damaging. Indeed, World War I was “perhaps the last to be conceived as taking place within a seamless, purposeful ‘history’ involving a coherent stream of time running from past through present to future” (21). For these young Britons, the values and norms they had grown up with were rapidly being shattered by the shrapnel of all-encompassing war.

Likewise, Kitty’s world is disintegrating. When Chris returns from the military hospital where he has been recuperating, Kitty is still wobbling between safety and peril as Chris has no recollection of the woman he married. This breeds deep fear in Kitty, and she fights to make her husband remember her. In fact, their first meeting after Chris returns from the trenches is much like a battle scene:

‘I am your wife.’ There was a weak, wailing
anger behind the words. ‘Kitty,’ he said, softly

and kindly. He looked round for some sense of graciousness to make the scene less wounding, and stooped to kiss her. But he could not. The thought of another woman made him unable to breathe, sent the blood running under his skin. With a toss, like a child saying, 'Well, if you don't want to, I'm sure I wouldn't for the world!' Kitty withdrew from the suspended caress. He watched her retreat into the shadows, as if she were a symbol of his new life by which he was baffled and oppressed [...] (24)

As Jenny narrates the exchange, she uses words like *wailing*, *wounding*, *retreat*, and *withdrew* to show that Kitty is losing the battle to make her husband remember their life together (24). In the end, Kitty is forced to concede a temporary loss when she tries to lead her husband upstairs. Jenny notes that as they moved toward the bedroom, a place where they should have been most united, "a sense of separateness beat her [Kitty] back; she lifted her arms as though she struggled through a fog and finally fell behind" (25). Though there are no guns or poisoned gas alerts, Jenny's description invokes obvious wartime imagery. Not only is Kitty fighting her own fog, much like the fog that descended on the trenches, but she is, finally, forced to fall back, losing ground in this domestic battle. While Debra Rae Cohen argues that, because Kitty has been shielded from the "reality of war" she is "secure in her separate, ornamental role" (71), the truth is that Kitty's entire world has been turned into a combat zone. Everything she does,

from choosing which clothes to wear to speaking with her husband, is part of a daily battle Kitty must fight in order to maintain her lifestyle.

Of course, her initial meeting with Chris is not Kitty's only attempt to stave off the loss of her partner. Later that same night, Kitty adorns herself in jewels and "the gown she wore on her wedding-day...her right hand [is] stiff with rings and her left hand bare save for her wedding ring" (26). Kitty attempts to position herself in the most flattering light the room has to offer, hoping to make herself appear virgin-like and youthful. In his article "Trauma and Cure in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*," Steve Pinkerton briefly mentions this scene and Kitty's role in it: "Kitty's dress befits her self-presentation as the ghost of her former, 'virginal' self, dead these ten years" (8). Pinkerton goes on to argue that in writing Kitty as a ghostlike figure, West is setting the reader up for the appearance of the most important "ghost" of all: Chris and Kitty's deceased son, Oliver, since it is Chris' memory of Oliver that finally awakens him from his amnesia and restores a dubious order to Baldry Court.

While Pinkerton's reading of Kitty as a ghost is, in many ways, accurate, it does not portray the depth of Kitty's trauma. Instead, Pinkerton establishes Kitty's character as a means to a pre-conceived, or perhaps contrived, end to the novel. Yet, West is using Kitty to do much more; as a feminist writer, West is using this scene to examine the confines of patriarchy and the toll they take on women. In having Kitty don a white dress and wear her wedding ring, the very symbols of marriage, the reader is once again

reminded of how dependent Kitty is on the patriarchal system. In fact, the only tools Kitty has by which to lure Chris back to Baldry Court and the life they once shared are the very symbols of Kitty's enslavement to domesticity. So, while Kitty can exert some measure of control over her life, she must do so within the socially constructed boundaries of patriarchy, which only adds to her growing trauma and internal conflict.

While the loss of Chris is devastating to Kitty on many levels, Jenny's ultimate betrayal of Kitty may be even more disturbing. United by familial history and socioeconomic status, the two women ought to have been unified in their battle for Chris' memory. Yet, while Kitty fights both Chris and Margaret for the right to reclaim the life she built, Jenny has sided with Kitty's "enemy," Margaret. Margaret D. Stetz argues that, as the novel progresses, Jenny not only sympathizes with Chris and Margaret but also "becomes a part of their idealized *ménage a trois*" (168). When the couple is in the garden and Chris has fallen asleep on Margaret's lap, Jenny inserts herself into this private, romantic moment by watching the lovers from afar. She even calls them "my dear Chris and my dear Margaret" and marvels at all of the gifts Margaret has given to the traumatized Chris (70). By the end of the novel, Margaret has even become a sort of deity in Jenny's eyes. Instead of the revolting intruder she first appeared to be, Margaret has transformed for Jenny into "an intercessory being whose kindliness could be daunted only by some special and incredibly malicious decision of the Supreme Force" (77).

Jenny even goes so far as to pray to Margaret and the power she holds over the whole of Baldry Court, saying, “I was standing with my eyes closed and my hands abstractedly stroking the hat which was the symbol of her martyrdom, and I was thinking of her in a way that was a prayer to her” (77). In seeing Margaret as both an intercessory being and a martyr, Jenny has effectively turned her into a Christ-like figure, someone who can intervene to save Jenny from her damning status as a superfluous woman in Kitty’s household. If Margaret, a working-class woman who should have held no power at Baldry Court, can usurp Kitty’s role as lady of the house, then perhaps she can save Jenny from a place of submission.

It is not until the last chapter of the novel, however, that Jenny’s betrayal of Kitty is complete. After Dr. Anderson arrives, Jenny moves from worshipping Margaret from afar to actively siding with her against Kitty. When the doctor asks her about Chris’ life with Kitty, Jenny replies, “Nothing and everything was wrong [...] I’ve always felt it” (80-81). For Kitty, who has long had power over Jenny because the unmarried Jenny is absolutely dependent upon Chris and Kitty for her economic welfare, this is a shocking blow. In a time when unmarried women were considered superfluous, living only by the kindness of male relatives, the fact that Jenny can hurt Kitty at all is telling of just how much Kitty needs Chris and the patriarchal order he represents if she is going to recover any semblance of normalcy.

Jenny’s ultimate betrayal happens in Oliver’s nursery when she convinces Margaret not to tell Chris the truth

about his dead son. Such a revelation about a cherished child surely would awaken Chris from his amnesia and give Kitty her life back. However, when Margaret asks her whether or not she should shock Chris from his amnesia, Jenny cries, “Of course not! Of course not!” (87). Both Jenny and Margaret are content to leave Kitty’s life in a state of upheaval until Kitty appears in the doorway, distraught and obviously traumatized by the entire situation. Just like the worst kind of military betrayal—when trusted comrades are discovered to be traitors—Jenny’s betrayal very nearly ruins the rest of Kitty’s life: if Jenny had her way, Chris would never remember Kitty.

Through the initial shock of Margaret’s invasion of Baldry Court, Kitty’s fierce battle for Chris’ memory and attention, and, finally, Jenny’s betrayal, it becomes clear that the events of *The Return of the Soldier* cause Kitty great suffering, leading to what we now term Secondary Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Indeed, recent psychological studies suggest that the spouses of traumatized soldiers can be so deeply impacted by the upheaval of such a return that they, too, begin to display symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Though the term *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* is fairly recent, not having officially been used until after the Vietnam War, soldiers have been experiencing its effects for centuries. Indeed, Edgar Jones argues that there is evidence of soldiers struggling with the disorder as early as the Napoleonic Wars (1799-1815), when men who had not suffered physical wounds in combat but still exhibited

symptoms of “tingling, twitching and even partial paralysis” were diagnosed as having “cerebro-spinal shock” (535). During the American Civil War (1861-1865), soldiers suffered from a similar psychological disorder then known as “soldier’s heart.” However, World War I was the first time the disorder, then called “shell-shock,” began to affect large portions of society. In 1920, the Southborough Committee was appointed to study the phenomenon. Many of the symptoms they identified, including “fatigue, headache, difficulty sleeping, nightmares, memory loss, [and] poor concentration” are still considered by modern physicians to be indicators of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Jones 537).

The sudden interest of British doctors and the government in such disorders is not entirely surprising, given the fact that the Great War required hundreds of thousands of soldiers to fight in inhuman conditions, watching as new weaponry killed men in ways previously unheard of. Paul Fussell describes the soldier’s living conditions in great detail: “The stench of rotten flesh was over everything [...] dead horses and dead men—and parts of both—were sometimes not buried for months and often simply became an element of parapets and trench walls” (49). Soldiers also contended with rats, near-constant rain, cold, injuries, lack of food, and homesickness. These brutal conditions made many soldiers feel helpless.

In *The Female Malady*, Elaine Showalter argues that, in addition to the subhuman conditions experienced by many soldiers during the Great War, impossible expectations also led to increased instances of shell-shock. She writes that

“[w]hen all signs of physical fear were judged as weaknesses and where alternatives to combat—pacifism, conscientious objection, desertion, even suicide—were viewed as unmanly, men were silenced and immobilized and forced, like women, to express their conflicts through the body” (169). If World War I was a test of Victorian masculinity, many soldiers were succumbing to the intense psychological pressure to be the perfect, heroic man.

Showalter calls shell shock during this period an “epidemic”: “By 1914 there were indications of a high percentage of mental breakdown among hospitalized men and officers [...] and by the end of the war, 80,000 cases had passed through army medical facilities” (169). The British government was completely unprepared for such a phenomenon. Not only was there a shortage of treatment facilities, but the idea that men could, and did, become “hysterical” was deeply disturbing to a society that valued honor, strength, and manliness. Men were expected to show great valor before, during, and after battle. Yet, as Showalter explains, “[p]laced in intolerable circumstances of stress and expected to act with unnatural ‘courage,’ thousands of men reacted with symptoms of hysteria” (172). These hysterical symptoms included nervousness, flashbacks, and sleep disorders.

In the decades following the war, further research around the shell-shock phenomenon was conducted. In 1980—the American Psychiatric Association finally added Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. At that time, PTSD was

diagnosed if a patient met all four of these criteria:

- (1) The existence of a recognizable stressor that would evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost everyone; (2) re-experiencing of the trauma with intrusive recollections, recurrent dreams, or suddenly feeling the event was reoccurring; (3) a sense of isolation from others characterized by diminished responsiveness or interest in activities, a feeling of detachment or constricted affect; and (4) two or more of the following symptoms: hyper-alertness, sleep disturbance, survivor guilt, concentration or memory impairment, avoidance of activities that stimulate recollections of the event. (Spiegel 21)

In the 1990's, these strict criteria began to be questioned. In his article "Dissociation and Hypnosis in Posttraumatic Stress Disorders," Eric Spiegel notes that "[t]rauma can be understood as the experience of being made an object [...] the traumatic event is a situation which wrests from patients control over their own states of mind" (18). This broader definition of the trauma that can lead to PTSD recognizes more victims, including women like Kitty, allowing them to receive the treatment that is necessary for recovery.

Diagnostic attitudes toward PTSD continue to change in the twenty-first century. According to *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Issues and Controversies*, PTSD today is diagnosed when an event involves "actual or threatened death or serious injury to self or others" and when "the

person's response involve[s] intense fear, helplessness, or horror" (Rosen 64). Clearly, Chris' experiences in World War I meet these criteria. In any sort of battle situation, death or serious injury is a possible, even likely, reality, and having to witness the deaths of comrades in arms would undoubtedly lead to terror and a feeling of extreme vulnerability.

More relevant to Kitty's position in *The Return of the Soldier*, modern research suggests that women whose husbands suffer from PTSD are also at risk of developing their own version of PTSD, known as Secondary Stress Disorder. According to a recently published article in the *Croatian Medical Journal*, Secondary Stress Disorder "is almost identical to PTSD except that indirect exposure to the traumatic event through close contact with the primary victim becomes the criterion" (Franciskovic 178). The same study found that "[m]ore than a third of war veterans' wives [Croatian veterans of the Croatian War of Independence, 1991-95] met the criteria for secondary traumatic stress [and that] half the wives of war veterans with PTSD had six or more symptoms of secondary traumatic stress. Only three [of fifty-six women] did not have any of the symptoms" (177, 181). Many of the women in the study had difficulty sleeping, avoided thinking about the traumatic experience suffered by their spouse, and/or became irritable, depressed, or withdrawn. This parallels Kitty's experience in a domestic war as she fights to win back her husband, her marriage, and the self-identity that she inherits with their status.

While the arrival of Margaret and her earth-shattering news of Chris' illness does not terrorize Kitty in the same

physical sense as the bombardments faced by soldiers in the battle zone, Margaret's occupation of Kitty's home is a real and significant danger to Kitty's life as an aristocratic wife and mother. As Debra Ray Cohen notes, Margaret is the "walking symbol of the instability of the Baldry Court 'empire'" (74). In a time when aristocratic women could not survive without a man, if Chris cannot remember his marriage to Kitty, she has the potential to lose everything. Not only will her marriage crumble, but so too will her social status and the small amount of power she has managed to garner as the head of Baldry Court. This knowledge, and her inability to make Chris remember her, leads Kitty to a desperate, overwhelming feeling of helplessness. By the end of the novel, Jenny notes that Kitty has begun to "drift like her dog about the corridors" (87). Instead of the regal woman of the novel's opening, Kitty is now as vulnerable and inconsequential as a lapdog.

With this in mind, it becomes clear that Kitty, too, meets the initial criteria for a PTSD diagnosis. The symptoms she displays throughout the novel only reinforce this idea. One of the most prominent symptoms of PTSD is a disruption in sleep patterns (Rosen 65). Jenny notices that after his return to Baldry Court, Chris "[has] bad nights" and cannot sleep without nightmares (70). While Kitty's sleep disturbances are not described in such detail, "the darkening under [her] eyes" is mentioned multiple times throughout the narrative, suggesting the haggard effects of sleepless nights (74). Both Chris and Kitty also face self-imposed "social isolation" (Rosen 65). Aside from his doctors, Chris

does not see anyone but Margaret. He even stops confiding in Jenny, who was once a dear friend. Kitty is also absent from most of Jenny's narrative, appearing only briefly during mealtimes. She does not receive visits from family or friends and never once leaves the house. In fact, Kitty spends much of the narrative tucked away upstairs.

When she does enter a room, Kitty is often angry. Even with Dr. Anderson, Kitty does not cry or beg for help; instead, she displays a "rising temper" and makes "sharp movement[s]" (81). She has withdrawn so much so that she has become unlikeable. In the last scene of the novel when Margaret is going out to tell Chris the truth about Oliver, Jenny is offended when Kitty says, "I wish she [Margaret] would hurry up. She's got to do it sooner or later" (89). While this may at first seem like the comment of a heartless woman, in view of a PTSD diagnosis, Kitty's anger and "emotional numbing" are actually symptoms of psychological trauma and not a lack of compassion (Rosen 65). *The Encyclopedia of Fears, Phobias and Anxieties* details this phenomenon: "Some individuals who have PTSD say they cannot feel emotions, especially toward those to whom they are closest; or if they can feel emotions, often they cannot express them" ("Posttraumatic Stress Disorder" 392). Kitty's abrasive attitude, then, becomes a psychological symptom and not merely a cause for upset.

Additionally, erratic behavior is a hallmark of PTSD, and Kitty experiences several shifts in mood after learning of Chris' amnesia. When Chris and Kitty first meet after his homecoming and discuss Margaret's presence at Baldry

Court, Kitty is initially depicted as “sweet and obedient and alert” (30). Yet, just one page later, Jenny says that Kitty is, once again, “manufacturing malice” (31). Even when Dr. Anderson visits at the end of the novel, Kitty greets him almost seductively. Jenny says, “[S]he had reduced her grief to no more than a slight darkening under the eyes [...] I knew it was because she was going to meet a new man and anticipated the kindling of admiration around his eyes” (74). However, as soon as the conversation turns to Chris, Kitty’s movements become sharp and she “quite ceased to glow” (80). Jenny’s description of Kitty’s behavior reinforces the conventional views of Kitty as unfeeling and manipulative, if not exhibiting the characteristics of an outright *femme fatale*. And yet, these rapid transitions in Kitty’s behavior suggest from a psychological perspective that Kitty is fighting to understand and control her reeling emotions. She is sometimes quiet, withdrawn, and very much in need of Jenny’s companionship. At other moments, however, Kitty seems to blame Jenny for everything that has happened at Baldry Court, becoming harsh and unreasonable.

Nevertheless, the society in which she lives largely ignores Kitty’s pain. The doctors who come to treat Chris never once ask Kitty how she is coping with the strain of her husband’s amnesia, and even Jenny spends most of her time merely observing Kitty’s trauma. Even when Jenny does make a point to recognize the extent of Kitty’s suffering, it is generally as a way to compare Kitty to Margaret, whom Jenny is increasingly drawn to throughout the novel. In fact, as the narrative progresses, the reader finds Jenny becoming

more and more hostile in her descriptions of Kitty, even as Kitty's trauma becomes increasingly prominent.

No one else outside of Baldry Court seems to note or care about Kitty's situation. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that Kitty's war takes place in the home. In a time when men and women operated in separate spheres and the public, male sphere was considered central to the continuation of civilized society, Kitty's domestic trauma is easily labeled as a relatively unimportant conflict between women.

Linda Kerber details this phenomenon in her article "Separate Spheres, Female World, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History." Though Kerber's research focuses mainly on women in the United States, she writes that both American and European women were confined to the home through the rhetoric of gender-segregated spheres. "Women were said to live in a distinct 'world,'" Kerber argues, "engaged in nurturant activities, focused on children, husbands and family dependents" (11). This female world was, theoretically, entirely disconnected from the domains of business, politics, and war. It was this "socially constructed difference between public and private" that allowed men to continue to keep women in the home, protected and preserved as doll-like figurines (14).

Thus, Kitty's trauma, which is viewed as a part of her private world, is seen to affect only Kitty, her family, and her home. According to Edwardian British society, what happens in the home, particularly things that happen to *women* in the home, have little relevance to the larger issues of the day. With total war encompassing most of Europe and thousands

of young British soldiers returning home with symptoms of shell-shock, the plight of women's suffering was virtually invisible.

To complicate matters further, Kitty's symptoms strikingly parallel those of the psychological condition widely known in the nineteenth century as *hysteria*. The belief in a woman's vulnerability to hysteria allowed Kitty's contemporaries to ignore her shell-shock symptoms, writing them off as the emotional upsets of the "weaker sex." Hysteria, thought to be caused by a disturbance of the uterus, was given as a diagnosis throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to women who suffered from extreme nervousness, paralysis, unexplained pain, convulsions, amnesia, or loss of speech. In the article "Hysteria in Four Acts," Paul R. McHugh argues that, even today, "*hysteria* is used loosely to describe a state of being overly emotional, wildly dramatic, or out of control" (18). Victims of hysterical spells, who are almost always women, are generally considered to be suffering from some sort of imagined trauma rather than a real psychological disorder, such as PTSD.

The idea of hysterical women allowed British society to ignore female trauma as something entirely separate, and somehow less important, than male trauma, even though many shell-shock cases paralleled symptoms of hysteria (Showalter 170). West sheds light on this phenomenon toward the end of *The Return of the Soldier* when Jenny describes herself and Kitty as living inside of a crystal ball, with Chris looking down on them. As Chris reaches for

Margaret, Jenny and Kitty's ball crashes to the floor, and Jenny notes, "No one weeps for the shattering of our world" (67). Indeed, Chris himself does not even notice that their crystal ball has rolled away.

In spite of the fact that Kitty's world has been shattered by Chris' amnesia, no relatives, friends, clergymen, or medical professionals come to her aid. In fact, Jenny seems to be the only other person who notices Kitty's trauma until the very last pages of the novel when Margaret also sees the broken, haunted shell Kitty has become. When Kitty wanders the halls of Baldry Court, almost completely incapacitated by grief, Jenny writes that Kitty's suffering is what "reminded us [Jenny *and* Margaret] of reality" (87). Indeed, Margaret is awakened to the true nature of her decision to keep Chris in a state of amnesia only by Kitty's suffering.

None of the men in the novel ever awaken to Kitty's altered appearance or demeanor. Chris is focused entirely on Margaret, and Dr. Anderson, who appears at the height of Kitty's worry over Chris' amnesia, not only ignores Kitty's pain but also behaves rather harshly to her. At one point, the doctor even tells Kitty, "One forgets only those things that one wants to forget," thus implying that Kitty's husband, quite simply, would rather suffer a mental breakdown than return to the life they once shared (80). Given the fact that Kitty is described as "the expression of grief" only a few pages later, Dr. Anderson's words seem unnecessarily cruel (87). Yet, somehow, even this trained professional seems to miss the depth of Kitty's trauma during his lengthy

conversation with her.

This tendency of male-dominated societies to ignore female pain continues into the present day, as supported by recent data about the United States' treatment of military personnel. Perhaps not surprisingly given the historical understanding of PTSD, hysteria, and gender stereotypes in general, the trauma of female Iraqi war veterans is often overlooked by the military's mental health community. In "Forever Changed: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Female Military Veterans, A Case Report," Diana Feczer and Pamela Bjorkland write that "[o]f 225 male and 232 female military veterans receiving treatment at a VA Medical Center, only 19.8% of the 40.1% of women who met criteria for PTSD were actually diagnosed, while 59.1% of the 62.7% of men who met the criteria for PTSD received the diagnosis" (280). It seems likely that the trauma these women experience in Iraq, while very real, is often seen as somehow less important than male trauma simply because women in the military have not experienced direct combat. Furthermore, keeping male and female trauma separate allows patriarchal societies to attach more significance to injuries, physical or mental, gained during combat.

Similarly, Kitty's mental injuries are viewed as less significant than Chris' because she did not participate in combat. However, Kitty's trauma may be even more devastating than that of the modern women who participated in the Feczer/Bjorkland study. Since Kitty's entire identity is wrapped up in Chris, it can be argued that when her husband is in pain, she is in pain. Unlike most Western women living

in the twenty-first century who have jobs, driver's licenses, the ability to vote, and a social circle that is not dependent upon their husband's status, Kitty is, quite literally, nobody without Chris. Therefore, when Chris reenters Baldry Court, this time with amnesia and yearnings for an old lover, Kitty experiences her own traumatization that is even more intense than the symptoms experienced by most modern women. "Unemployed wives spend more time at home, are more financially dependent on their husbands, have smaller social network[s] and feel less useful, which additionally aggravates their psychological problems" (Franciskovic 183). For Kitty, who is not merely unemployed, but has *never* held a job and has even been trained to scorn working women like Margaret, this traumatization is far worse.

While modern society is beginning to take note of PTSD in females, Rebecca West wrote her novel in a time when traumatized women were, by and large, regarded as hysterical. There were no large-scale studies being done on how women handled the stress and disruption of total war. In fact, Britain was only just beginning to understand how such conflicts affected men. Yet, West, who was ahead of her time by nearly a century, wrote *The Return of the Soldier* from a distinctly female perspective. Indeed, Kitty Baldry, perceived by her fellow characters and literary critics alike as domineering and wrathful, deserves our sympathy in like measure to her wounded veteran husband as she suffers through the trauma of an invasion on her home, the loss of Chris, and Jenny's ultimate betrayal.

In the end, even though both Jenny and Margaret had

previously decided that Chris is safer remaining in his shell-shocked state, the sight of Kitty's gaunt figure finally moves them to action. Indeed, for the first time in the entirety of West's work, Kitty's trauma is acknowledged when Jenny sees her in the hall and knows immediately that Chris cannot stay in his "magic circle" forever (88). Indeed, even as she and Margaret recognize that they must awaken Chris, Jenny asks, "Now, why did Kitty, who was the falsest thing on earth, who was in tune to every kind of falsity, by merely suffering remind us of reality?" (87). This reality, which forces Margaret to leave Chris and Baldry Court and restores Jenny to the role of an outsider is not, for Jenny at least, a pleasant one. However, within the context of a patriarchal society, it is a necessary restoration. It will bring about the continuation of the systems which have allowed Kitty to prosper at the expense of her personal freedom. Much as Chris' awakening, which will send him back to the throes of war, seems unfortunate and somehow incomplete, so too does Kitty's.

For both Chris and Kitty, the ending of the novel signifies a shift but not a healing. These characters are moving onward with their lives, but their marriage has proven to be a sham, as have the gender roles they embody. In spite of everything, Chris is still expected to present himself as a pillar of English manhood; even Jenny recognizes that he will soon be shipped back to war, saying that "he [Chris] would go back to that flooded trench in Flanders under that sky more full of death than clouds" (90). Kitty is also left to simply reclaim her place in society

without so much as a legitimate acknowledgement of the trauma she suffered. As Debra Rae Cohen writes, “[t]he very echoing, undetermined emptiness of Baldry Court—at novel’s end a lingering tang of sterility—serves to emphasize the claustrophobia of the conclusion” (83). Indeed, neither character is treated for PTSD symptoms. Instead, in the end, the trauma is swept under the proverbial rug to be dealt with later—or perhaps never.

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